9 out of 10 in class I won't get to college

Some dramatic changes have taken place in India's education system in the past couple of decades, of which only a few are reflected in statistics. Enrolment has increased tremendously in schools, technical and professional courses, colleges, distance learning centers, even coaching and tuition centers. Official enrolment figures reflect this increase, but cannot capture the immense and universal aspiration for education that continues to sweep the country. Unlike the bygone days when it was often necessary to persuade people to send their children to school, today parents largely see it as a bounden duty, while the youngsters themselves are busy working out different options of studies.

For instance, take the school system. The number of students enrolled in elementary education (classes 1 to 8) was about 1.9 crore in 1951. It is now estimated at over 13 crore, about seven times more. For classes 9 to 12, the enrolment has increased from about 15 lakh in 1951 to over 3.7 crore, an over 25-fold increase.

In higher education, there has been a 70-fold increase in enrolment. In 1951 there were only 1.7 lakh students pursuing education beyond class 12. Now the number is touching 1.2 crore.

While the spread of education reflected in these numbers is undoubtedly impressive, One needs to look at it from another perspective — is everybody getting education? To find out, we have to look at two things — how many children or youth in the age group 6-24 years actually get into educational institutions, and how many manage to complete their education.

The proportion of students enrolled for class 1 to 5 in the total number of children in the 6-11 years age group, called the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for that age group, is about 107%. That means virtually all children in this age group and some who are older but in these classes are enrolled in schools. However, for class 6 to 8, this proportion, for the age group 11-14 years, falls to about 70%. It continues falling in the next stage of class 9 to 12 also — just about touching 40%. By the time we reach higher education, the proportion of students has fallen to an abysmal 10%.
This unfortunate reality is reflected also in the drop-out rates. By class 5, about one third of the students have dropped out, by class 8, about half have quit, and by class 8 nearly two-thirds of them are no longer in school.

Clearly, with each advancing class through the school system and then in the higher education system, students keep leaving the education system. For some reason, the great aspiration and striving for getting educated and making it good in life peters out midway, so much so that only one out of 10 persons makes it to higher education institutions.

There are complex socio-economic factors at work here. But it all boils down to either poverty or abiding social biases. These create and perpetuate endemic divisions that make one section of people disadvantaged or under-privileged.

As an example of how these divisions affect the education system, take literacy, which is but one measure of how the education system is functioning. In 1951, about 18% Indians were literate. Among men the literacy rate was 27%, but among women it was an abysmal 8%. In 2006, about 78% men were literate but only 55% women had become literate. It is a vast improvement over 1951, but not enough. A similar gender gap is noticeable in the enrolment ratios for women, although the situation has vastly improved since Independence.

Then there is the rural-urban chasm. Back in 1951, 35% of urban residents were literate, but only 12% of rural people. In 2006, 80% of urbanites were literate but in rural areas the literacy rate was still far behind — at 59%. The gap is almost of the same order as in 1951.

Another persistent division leaves the most socio-economically backward castes and tribal communities at a disadvantage. Among scheduled castes, the literacy rate was 55%, while among scheduled tribes it was 47% in 2006. These are way behind 'other backward classes', which have a literacy rate of about 66%, and all the remaining castes, which have the highest literacy at over 78%. Although literacy has improved very rapidly among SC/STs — increasing more rapidly than other sections of the population — it still lags behind other groups.

The disadvantages suffered by SC/ST members are even more starkly visible in the case of enrolment in educational institutions. Till the primary stage, members of both social groups are present in large numbers, even more than the overall average. But subsequently they start lagging behind.

This has nothing to do with performance — SC/ST communities are by far the poorest sections in India, and the pressure to start earning is always more weighty than studying.

Finally, there is the rich-poor divide. Among the poorest third of our society, literacy is only about 46%. In the middle third it improves to 65%, while among the richest third of the population, it is over 72%.
Certain religious minorities, notably Muslims, too suffer from educational deprivation. For instance, only about 9% of primary students are Muslims whereas their proportion in the total population is about 13%.

These divisions are there for all other parameters like enrolment, pass percentages (where the disadvantaged sections lag) and drop out rates, class repetition rates (where they have higher rates). In short, those on the other side of the Great Divides generally have less access to education, remain in it for shorter periods and perform worse than the more privileged sections. They are largely excluded from the system.

The high rates of enrolment at the primary stages across the country, and their continued stability, has a ready explanation — the mid-day meal scheme, launched by the government in its present form after a Supreme Court order in 2001. Over 12 crore children are estimated to be covered by this scheme, making it the largest school nutrition programme in the world. The court had directed that it was mandatory for school authorities to provide cooked meals to all primary students.

This has led to a groundswell of enthusiasm among parents, especially the poorer sections, as their children are now assured at least one proper meal a day. This highlights the deep link between the economic condition of the family and its ability to provide educational opportunities to children.

Another event that will have a long-term effect is the inclusion of the right to education as a fundamental right in 2002. The provision, in its final form was restricted to children in the age group 6-14 years although there was considerable mobilization by NGOs and other movements for a more inclusive definition. However, it says implementation will be worked out by the State through necessary laws. This has led to the government dragging its feet in getting it off the ground.

Implementation would mean that the government would be accountable to the courts if children were left out.

(Courtesy: Special Reports, Times of India)